
*The Essential Tales
and Poems
of Edgar Allan Poe*

*Edited with an Introduction and Notes
by Benjamin F. Fisher*

*George Stade
Consulting Editorial Director*



BARNES & NOBLE CLASSICS
NEW YORK

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*From the Pages of The Essential Tales
and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*

I kneel, an altered and an humble man,
Amid thy shadows, and so drink within
My very soul thy grandeur, gloom, and glory!

(from "The Coliseum," page 19)

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary, Over many a quaint and curious
volume of forgotten lore—While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping, As of some
one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door. "Tis some visiter," I muttered, "tapping at my
chamber door—

Only this and nothing more."

(from "The Raven," page 24)

On the Future! how it tells
Of the rapture that impels
To the swinging and the ringing
Of the bells, bells, bells,
Of the bells, bells, bells, bells,
Bells, bells, bells—

To the rhyming and the chiming of the bells!

(from "The Bells," page 33)

A feeling, for which I have no name, has taken possession of my soul—a sensation which will admit
of no analysis, to which the lessons of bygone time are inadequate, and for which I fear futurity itself
will offer me no key. (from "Ms. Found in a Bottle," page 74)

"The first thing requisite is to get yourself into such a scrape as no one ever got into before. The oven
for instance,—that was a good hit. But if you have no oven, or big bell, at hand, and if you cannot
conveniently tumble out of a balloon, or be swallowed up in an earthquake, or get stuck fast in
chimney, you will have to be contented with simply imagining some similar misadventure."

(from "How to Write a Blackwood Article," page 143)

During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung
oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary
tract of country, and at length found myself, as the shades of evening drew on, within view of the
melancholy House of Usher.

(from "The Fall of the House of Usher," page 159)

I could not help remarking and admiring (although from his rich ideality I had been prepared to expect
it) a peculiar analytic ability in Dupin. He seemed, too, to take an eager delight in its exercise—if not
exactly in its display—and did not hesitate to confess the pleasure thus derived. (from "The Murderer
in the Rue Morgue," page 200)

The "Red Death" had long devastated the country. No pestilence had ever been so fatal, or so hideous

Blood was its Avatar and its seal—the redness and the horror of blood.

(from “The Masque of the Red Death,” page 261)

The sweep of the pendulum had increased in extent by nearly a yard. As a natural consequence its velocity was also much greater. But what mainly disturbed me was the idea that it had perceptibly *descended*. I now observed—with what horror it is needless to say—that its nether extremity was formed of a crescent of glittering steel, about a foot in length from horn to horn; the horns upward and the under edge evidently as keen as that of a razor.

(from “The Pit and the Pendulum,” page 274)

It was a *low, dull, quick sound—much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton.* (from “The Tell-Tale Heart,” page 285)

“The Prefect and his cohort fail so frequently, first, by default of this identification, and, secondly, by ill-admeasurement, or rather through non-admeasurement, of the intellect with which they are engaged. They consider only their *own* ideas of ingenuity; and, in searching for any thing hidden, advert only to the modes in which *they* would have hidden it.” (from “The Purloined Letter,” pages 371-372)

We continued our route in search of the Amontillado. We passed through a range of low arches, descended, passed on, and descending again, arrived at a deep crypt, in which the foulness of the air caused our flambeaux rather to glow than flame.

(from “The Cask of Amontillado,” page 430)

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Edgar Allan Poe

Edgar Allan Poe was born on January 19, 1809, in Boston, to Elizabeth Arnold Hopkins and David Poe, Jr., traveling stage actors. David Poe may have abandoned his young family in 1811; in an event, Eliza took Edgar and a newborn daughter to Richmond, Virginia, where on December 8 she died, possibly of pneumonia or tuberculosis. David, according to many, died two days later in Norfolk, Virginia.

A wealthy Richmond couple, John and Frances Allan, took Edgar into their home, and though the Allans never formally adopted him, in 1812 Edgar was christened as Edgar Allan Poe. John Allan provided Edgar with an excellent education, and the young man excelled in his studies. But tension with his guardian developed as Edgar grew up. John Allan became weary of the discontented youth whom he described as sulky and ill-tempered, and their relationship began a long decline.

In 1826 Edgar enrolled in the newly founded University of Virginia, where he studied ancient and modern languages. During his time at the university, he amassed large gambling debts, which John Allan refused to pay, deepening the rift between the two. Edgar left school and traveled to Boston where he joined the army and published his first volume of verse, *Tamerlane and Other Poems*, under the pseudonym “A Bostonian.” In 1829 Edgar’s foster mother, Frances Allan, died; he returned to Richmond and reconciled with John Allan. He then obtained an early discharge from the army and applied for admission to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. While awaiting acceptance, he visited his father’s family in Baltimore, where he published *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane, and Minor Poems*. Although he was an excellent cadet and a distinguished student, his time at West Point was short. Following a heated quarrel with John Allan, Edgar resolved to leave the Academy; to accomplish this he ceased attending classes or church services. In 1831 he was dishonorably discharged; that same year his book *Poems* was published in New York. He returned to Baltimore, determined to be a writer, and entered a fiction contest sponsored by the *Philadelphia Saturday Courier*, though he did not win. The *Courier* published five of his stories the following year. In 1833 Edgar won another newspaper fiction contest with “MS. Found in a Bottle,” but the scant prize money did little to alleviate his financial burdens, and he tried unsuccessfully to solicit his foster father’s help. In 1834 John Allan died, leaving a large fortune, but Edgar was not named in the will.

The next year Poe returned to Richmond and assumed the editorship of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, in which he published his own stories and acerbic critical reviews. He married his fourteen-year-old cousin Virginia Clemm in 1836. In 1837 he left the *Messenger*. Barely supporting his family as an editor, Poe was nonetheless a prolific writer and critic. He enjoyed some literary success with the publication of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838) and his two-volume *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (1840), which included “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “William Wilson.” He worked as an editor for *Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine* in Philadelphia, and in 1841 he joined the editorial staff of *Graham’s Magazine*, which published “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” a work that heralded a new literary genre, the modern detective story. Poe’s “The Pit and the Pendulum” and “The Masque of Red Death” were published in 1842, followed by “The Tell-Tale Heart” in 1843. That same year Poe’s tale “The Gold-Bug” won a fiction contest sponsored by a Philadelphia newspaper, bringing him greater renown.

Poe moved his family to New York in 1844 and took an editing position with the *Evening Mirror*.

January 1845, his most famous poem, "The Raven," appeared in the *Mirror*, propelling him into the circles of New York's literati. But none of his successes brought him financial security or lasting happiness. In February 1845, he became editor of the new *Broadway Journal*; but the journal folded in 1846, and Poe's young wife succumbed to tuberculosis in 1847. The next year Poe seemed to rally, giving lectures and courting the poet Sarah Helen Whitman, though she later broke off the engagement.

In 1849 Poe began a lecture tour to raise funds for a new magazine. On his way from Richmond to New York, he stopped in Baltimore, where he was found on the night of October 3 nearly unconscious in the street. Edgar Allan Poe died on October 7, 1849. Various accounts were given of Poe's last day, but the cause of his death remains a mystery.

The World of Edgar Allan Poe

- 1809 Edgar Poe is born in Boston on January 19, the second child of David and Elizabeth Arnold Hopkins Poe, both traveling stage actors. James Madison becomes the fourth president of the United States. Washington Irving publishes *A History of New York... by Diedrich Knickerbocker*. Charles Darwin, Abraham Lincoln, and Alfred, Lord Tennyson are born.
- 1810 Apparently deserted by her husband, Elizabeth moves to Richmond. Her oldest son, William Henry, lives with relatives in Baltimore, Maryland. Edgar's sister, Rosalie Poe, is born in Norfolk, Virginia. On December 8 Elizabeth Poe dies at the age of twenty-four, possibly of tuberculosis. David Poe, also ill and perhaps unaware of his wife's death, apparently dies two days later in Norfolk. Rosalie is adopted into the home of William Mackenzie, while Edgar is taken into the household of John Allan, a wealthy tobacco merchant. His wife, Frances, who attended Elizabeth Poe's sickbed, takes pity on the orphaned boy and convinces her husband to take the child into their home as a ward. Although they raise him as their own, the Allans never formally adopt young Edgar.
- 1811
- 1812 Edgar is baptized and, with the Allans presumably acting as his godparents, christened as Edgar Allan Poe. Charles Dickens is born. Lord Byron publishes *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. The United States declares war on Britain.
- 1815 Edgar moves with the Allan family to England, where, after a tour of Scotland, they settle in London. John Allan opens a London branch of his business, which soon prospers.
- 1816 Edgar attends the London boarding school of the Misses Dubourg. Samuel Taylor Coleridge publishes *Kubla Khan*. Jane Austen publishes *Emma*.
- 1818 Edgar moves to the boarding school of the Reverend John Bransby in London, where he studies Latin and dancing. He is an accomplished but lonely student. The U.S.-Canadian border is formalized. Mary Shelley publishes *Frankenstein*.
- 1819 Following the collapse of the London tobacco market, John Allan's London business closes under the strain of unpaid debts. The S.S. *Savannah* becomes the first steam-powered ship to cross the Atlantic. Walt Whitman and Herman Melville are born. Walter Scott publishes *Ivanhoe*.
- 1820 The Allans return to America, arriving in New York in July before continuing on to Richmond. Maine and Missouri enter the Union under the Missouri Compromise.
- 1821 Edgar enrolls in the school of Joseph H. Clarke. He begins writing poetry, composing one of his earliest surviving poems, "O, Tempora! O, Mores!"
- 1823 He attends a school run by William Burke. U.S. President James Monroe presents Congress with the Monroe Doctrine, a policy intended to curtail European encroachment into the

- 1824 Edgar transforms his fragile physique and excels in athletics, including boxing, running, and swimming; in the summer, he swims 6 miles up the James River. He joins the Richmond Junior Volunteers, becoming a lieutenant and participating in a military review by General Lafayette during his tour of America.
- 1825 Edgar enters the school of Dr. Ray Thomas. John Allan inherits a sizable fortune from an uncle and purchases a mansion in downtown Richmond called Moldavia.
- 1826 Poe enrolls in the University of Virginia, where he studies ancient and modern languages. He gains a favorable reputation in the Jefferson Society debating club and continues to distinguish himself as an athlete. The fledgling university is, at times, a violent and depraved setting. Poe witnesses riots and assaults, and amasses large gambling debts. He pursues an epistolary romance with Elmira Royster but is rebuffed by her father. Tension between Poe and John Allan grows, partly because of Poe's gambling debts, which exceed \$2,000. Thomas Jefferson, the third U.S. president and founder of the University of Virginia, dies.
- 1827 The feud between Poe and John Allan reaches a peak. Poe moves out of his surrogate father's home and returns to the city of his birth. In Boston, he enlists for a five-year tour in the U.S. Army using the alias "Edgar A. Perry." Under the pseudonym "A Bostonian," Poe publishes a collection of Byronic poetry, *Tamerlane and Other Poems*. In the fall, Poe's company is transferred to South Carolina.
- 1828 Poe's company is stationed at Fort Monroe, Virginia. He sends letters to John Allan seeking reconciliation. Andrew Jackson is elected U.S. president. Noah Webster publishes the *American Dictionary of the English Language*. Jules Verne is born.
- 1829 On New Year's Day, Poe is promoted to sergeant-major. In February, Frances Allan dies, and Poe returns to Richmond, arriving the day following her funeral. Poe and John Allan reconcile. Poe is released from the army and applies for entrance to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. His admission is delayed, and he travels to Baltimore, where he finds a publisher for his second book of poems, *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane, and Minor Poems*. Mexico abolishes slavery.
- 1830 In the spring, Poe is admitted to West Point, where he distinguishes himself in his studies and is well liked by his fellow cadets. Yet tensions between him and John Allan rise again after Allan marries Louisa Gabriella Patterson, a woman twenty years his junior. John Allan stops supporting Poe financially. The young man resolves to leave West Point and ceases to attend classes or church services. Emily Dickinson is born.
- 1831 Poe is court-martialed and dishonorably discharged from West Point. He travels to New York, where he publishes *Poems*. Poe returns to Baltimore, where he lives among his father's family and reunites with his elder brother, William Henry, whose health is poor; William Henry dies on August 1. Poe enters the *Philadelphia Saturday Courier's* fiction contest. He does not win the prize, but his work is praised. William Lloyd Garrison begins to publish his abolitionist newspaper, the *Liberator*. Nat Turner leads a slave rebellion. The

population of the United States is nearly 13 million.

- 1832 The *Saturday Courier* publishes five of Poe's stories: "Met zengerstein," "The Bargain Lost" (later revised as "Bon-Bon"), "Duke de L'Omelette," "A Decided Loss" (later revised as "Loss of Breath"), and "A Tale of Jerusalem." Horatio Alger and Louisa May Alcott are born.
- 1833 Poe's "MS. Found in a Bottle" wins a writing contest sponsored by a weekly Baltimore newspaper, the *Saturday Visiter*. Poe's repeated attempts to reconcile with John Allan are met with uncompromising resistance. Slavery is abolished in the British Empire.
- 1834 John Allan dies in Richmond on March 27. Before his death, Allan had written Poe out of his will, and the financially desperate young writer receives nothing from Allan's large estate.
- 1835 Poe moves to Richmond, where he becomes editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*. Poe's critical reviews and stories begin to appear in the journal, including "Berenice," "King Pest," and "Morella." Samuel Clemens, better known as Mark Twain, is born. P. T. Barnum gives his first exhibition.
- 1836 Poe marries his fourteen-year-old cousin Virginia Clemm on May 16. He contributes many blunt, often scathing reviews to the *Southern Literary Messenger* and gains a reputation as a fearless critic. Davy Crockett is killed at the Alamo.
- 1837 Poe leaves the *Southern Literary Messenger*, possibly because of alcohol abuse, and takes Virginia and her mother to live in New York City. Chapters of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* are published in the *Messenger*. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* is an American bestseller.
- 1838 *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, Poe's only novel, is published in New York by Harper and Brothers. His tale "Ligeia" is published in the *American Museum*. Poe moves his family to Philadelphia.
- 1839 Poe becomes an assistant editor for *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine*. He begins to write essays on cryptography (a life-long interest) and publishes "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "William Wilson" in *Burton's*. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow publishes "Hyperion." Abner Doubleday organizes the first game of baseball.
- 1840 Lea and Blanchard, a Philadelphia publisher, releases Poe's *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*. Poe is fired from *Burton's*. He serializes the novel *The Journal of Julius Rodman* in *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine*. James Fenimore Cooper's *The Pathfinder* is an American bestseller.
- 1841 Poe works as an editor for *Graham's Magazine*, in which he publishes "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," generally considered the first modern detective story. Poe corresponds with James Fenimore Cooper. President William Henry Harrison dies a month after his inauguration and is succeeded by Vice President John Tyler. Ralph Waldo Emerson

publishes his first collection of essays. The U.S. population reaches 17 million.

1842 Poe meets Charles Dickens, who publishes *American Notes* this year. Virginia begins to show symptoms of tuberculosis. Poe publishes “The Pit and the Pendulum” and “The Masque of the Red Death.”

1843 The *United States Saturday Post* publishes “The Black Cat,” and “The Tell-Tale Heart” appears in James Russell Lowell’s new literary journal, the *Pioneer*. Poe’s story “The Gold-Bug” wins a \$100 prize from a Philadelphia newspaper and brings him wider renown. Henry James is born. The U.S. Congress commissions Samuel Morse to build the first telegraph line from Washington to Baltimore.

1844 Poe moves his family to New York City, where he finds a position with the *Evening Mirror*.

1845 “The Raven” appears in the *Evening Mirror* on January 29. In February, Poe becomes an editor for the fledgling *Broadway Journal*. The New York publisher Wiley and Putnam issues Poe’s *Tales* and *The Raven and Other Poems*.

1846 Virginia Poe’s tuberculosis worsens, and the *Broadway Journal* ceases publication. Poe moves his family to Fordham, New York. He writes “The Cask of Amontillado” and “The Philosophy of Composition.” American troops annex New Mexico after negotiations for the territory’s purchase break down. The Smithsonian Institution is founded in Washington. Melville publishes *Typee*.

1847 Virginia Poe dies on January 30.

1848 Poe lectures on the nature of the universe and writes *Eureka: A Prose Poem*. He courts poet Sarah Helen Whitman; when he fails to abstain from drinking, she calls off the engagement. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels publish the *Communist Manifesto*. Discovery of gold sparks the first California gold rush.

1849 Poe begins a lecture tour to raise money for a new magazine, to be called the *Stylus*. He returns to Richmond and attempts to rekindle a romance with his first love, Elmira Royster Shelton. In August he joins the Sons of Temperance, vowing to abstain from alcohol. Traveling back to New York, Poe stops in Baltimore, where, on October 3, he is discovered delirious and nearly unconscious in the street. Edgar Allan Poe dies on October 7, 1849.

Introduction

As a student of Edgar Allan Poe's classical learning has stated, "If Poe had a 'ruling passion,' it was to acquire and to sustain the pose of a classical scholar and Virginia gentleman."¹ This yearning for fame and fortune, transmuted onto the literary plane, repeatedly caused him anguish and earned him meager profits; yet it inspired some of the most fascinating poetry and fiction in the English language. Poe's wish to appear erudite has sometimes created difficulties with his language and allusions for modern readers. His literary motives have often been baffling, especially those underlying his fiction. His fiction often made fun of what he wrought best: terror tales. In his writing about his own writing, controversies and ironies continue to swirl, often blurring where Poe the person stops and Poe the creative writings begin. Contrary to long-lasting mythologies, Poe—exceptionally conscious artist that he was—is not the protagonist in his tales and poems. Though autobiographical portraiture often colored literary productions in his era (and in a few cases entered his own work, but in minor ways), it continues to do in many instances today, it is not the dominant mode of Poe's writings.

Born in 1809 in Boston to a British emigrant mother, Elizabeth Arnold Hopkins, and a Baltimore father, David Poe, Jr., he has repeatedly been associated with the antebellum South, where he spent much of the first half of his life as the foster son (never adopted) of John and Frances Allan, of Richmond, Virginia. Sometime during 1811, David Poe, Jr., deserted his family; Mrs. Poe became ill and died in Richmond in December of that same year. Edgar consequently was taken in by the Allan family, whence derives his middle name, often misspelled even today. Though he expected to inherit John Allan's large fortune, Poe was disinherited and subsequently lived in poverty for much of his life. It is a wonder that he was able to create the artistic writings he did in light of the continual combat he waged against the wolf at his door during much of his brief life.

I

When Poe emerged as a writer during the 1820s, the American literary world was still very tentative about its achievements and prospects. Several major inspirations from abroad contributed to the literary milieu during that span, however, and creative writing in America seemed to increase between the immediate post-Revolutionary years and Poe's era. While major literary influences came from Great Britain and Germany, American nationalism was developing in all areas of life, and responses to such foreign influences were mixed. Many American authors and critics hoped for the creation of a distinctively American literature, which, they felt, should break from what they saw as negative traditions of the Old World. From the eighteenth into the nineteenth century American literary circles inveighed against terror or horror literature—so-called Gothic literature—because it supposedly displayed too much class structuring or too many sacrilegious themes, all expressed in extravagant language and implausible characterization. Many British and American readers also shared a hostility toward writing branded as "German" or "Germanism," supposedly because late-eighteenth-century German literature was seen both as vulgar and as manifesting many of the implausibilities of Gothic literature.

Despite the American and British criticism of Gothic literature (the term is most commonly applied to fiction, although many Gothic plays and poems exist) as too German, however, literary Gothicism

is actually British in origin. Descending from a melding of historical, architectural, and literary forces and a growing curiosity about nonrational states of mind, the Gothic revival in the arts commenced in the British Isles during the mid-eighteenth century. It was only later that German authors, who devoured British Gothic works, emulated those models and adopted Gothicism as their own. When interest in and criticism of German literature in turn sprang up in the Anglo-American literary world in the late eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century, many forgot about the precise origins of contemporary terror literature. If critics and general readers who had been nurtured on neoclassical principles—which emphasized order, reason, and balance—directed negative criticism toward what they dismissed as vulgar “Germanism,” many creative writers derived much from the Gothic mode. Irony and hostilities notwithstanding, works inspired by the Gothic tradition were published in Great Britain and America, starting with a great flourishing in the 1790s, and the legacy remains fruitful. For example, many current romance novels and horror tales, among others, continue to refashion techniques and themes that originated long ago.

In the first Gothic novel—Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, subtitled “A Gothic Story” and published anonymously in 1764, then with Walpole’s name revealed the next year—we encounter the vicious pursuit of innocence (and innocents) for purposes of power, lust, or money. These motives drive Prince Manfred, grandson of the usurper of the throne of Otranto in medieval Italy, who is eager to wed his son Conrad to lovely young Princess Isabella, to secure family succession to the throne. Conrad dies mysteriously, however, crushed by a gigantic black helmet that appears in the palace courtyard. Manfred rapidly proposes to have his own marriage annulled and marry Isabella himself, hoping that a younger wife will produce a son to secure succession. Revolted by Manfred’s obvious lust, Isabella flees through dark corridors and subterranean passages in the eerie old castle, aided by a mysterious young man, Theodore, who assists her escape to sanctuary in the neighboring monastery. Manfred’s rages against the young pair or anyone else who seems to thwart his will, his ill treatment of his docile wife, Hermione, his murdering his own daughter by mistake—all precede the clearing away of mysteries in family and political identities. Supernatural touches increase the character’s anxieties: The giant helmet portends tragedy; a portrait of Manfred’s ancestor becomes animated and seems to disapprove of his descendant’s behavior; disaster and gloom hover over all. Lust, near-incest, violence, brutality—all linked with family mysteries and identities over which the strange old decaying castle seems to preside—create overwhelming terror and fear. The comic speeches and actions of menials provide comic relief to the more grim sections in the story.

Walpole’s use of the castle and the nearby monastery as backdrops is a natural outgrowth of the contribution of the British cultural heritage to literary Gothicism. In the 1530s, King Henry VIII broke from Roman Catholicism because of circumstances akin to Manfred’s: Henry wanted a son to solidify his line’s succession within the British monarchy. His attempts came to naught, with tragedy resulting for most of his six wives. Henry also dissolved many British religious centers, an action that led to widespread sackings: Abbeys, churches, convents, monasteries, and cathedrals were ruined. By the mid-eighteenth century, such ruins came to symbolize transience in human aspirations. The inhabitants of such places, whose robed, hooded figures readily suggested ghosts or demons, provided origins for additional supernaturalism in literary Gothicism. Since the clerics had at one time held political as well as religious status, here were perfect targets for British anti-Catholics of a later day, cast as villains, especially since clerical celibacy also suggested unnatural sexuality. Appropriately, many British Gothic works were set in southern continental Europe, the seat of continuing Roman Catholic power, where villainous foreign policies and secretive character types would contrast

markedly with the British sense of open political, social, and religious life.

By the time of *The Castle of Otranto*, much British poetry had become imbued with what we now call “graveyard” topics—short lives, the grave (and its physical manifestations: gravestones, mausoleums, etc.) as symbolic of instability in the human condition, and the eeriness of churchyard environs. We need not wonder that Walpole’s imagination should have turned to similar themes and settings. *The Castle of Otranto* also owes a debt to the ranting, lustful, power-mad villains of Renaissance revenge tragedies. Walpole’s novel continues to puzzle readers, however, because we are never certain whether he wrote with absolute seriousness or if there is a smile just beneath the sensationalism. Thus, the origins of literary Gothicism yield both terrifying and humorous substance.

Although not every Gothic work includes a haunted castle, or lust, or money madness, most call to mind anxieties and power plays leading to tragedy—sometimes with supernatural interventions, sometimes with warped characters who move within eerie architectural or natural settings, which contribute to an emotional unsettledness and an overall gloomy atmosphere. The recurrent situation in Gothic literature is that of an alienated protagonist in an alien world. Some later writers present gory details of physical sufferings in repellant surroundings (horror); some others eschew the descriptions of physical tortures, preferring to delineate psychological effects of mysterious threats and oppressions (terror).

American authors experimenting with Gothicism had to either employ European settings and characters or adapt the Gothic to American subject matter. The person mainly responsible for this transformation was William Dunlap, the so-called father of American drama, who composed several Gothic plays during the 1790s. Three were European in substance, but *André* (1798), set during the American Revolution, adapted the overwrought psychology of a renowned wartime British spy captured by Americans, condemned to death, and awaiting execution. As in many other Gothics, war constituted a perfect foil to uncertainties in physical and emotional life. Dunlap’s friend Charles Brockden Brown turned to Gothicism in American locales for four of his six novels published in the late 1790s and early 1800s, and he is often credited with founding American literary Gothicism. American writers generally tended to emphasize psychological issues and to offer rational explanations for what might have seemed supernatural. Poe was to carry Gothicism to greater psychological heights than the majority of his predecessors.²

II

Poe wished above all else for recognition as a poet, an understandable desire in one whose literary tastes were shaped by the Romanticism bonding Anglo-American cultural worlds in his era. What is still remembered as the mainstream form of Romantic imaginative writing is the lyric poem, and in creating lyric poetry Poe excelled. Taking Coleridge, Shelley, Byron, and Thomas Moore as his obvious literary models (though he was also inspired by others both in the Romantic movement proper and on the periphery of that movement), Poe wrote verse featuring intense passions, sometimes concerning fame, more often concerned with blighted love, which affected the speaker-protagonist who desired successes in both areas. Gothic fiction also had a great impact on his imaginative writings.

Poe was also influenced by Romantic landscape poetry and travel books, which were popular among contemporary readers. He repeatedly created natural and architectural backdrops that were diffuse and misty, perfect surroundings for characters’ emotional uncertainties and fears. In the wake of

contemporary discoveries of the ruins of ancient civilizations and the fascination exerted by such artifacts, tangible evidence of once flourishing but long decayed cultures provided fitting literary symbols for his characters' disintegrating minds. Biblical and classical themes are evident in such early Poe poems as "The Lake," "The Coliseum," "The Sleeper," "To Helen" (published in 1831, the first of two poems with this title), "The City in the Sea," and "Dream-Land." Poe reworked such materials, usually with greater psychological sophistication, in later poems like "The Raven," "Ulalume: A Ballad," "Eldorado," "The Bells," and "Annabel Lee." All of Poe's poems might aptly be called "visionary," because the setting or the protagonist's emotions and consequent outlook are expressed in a rhetoric using primarily visual symbolism or vivid imagery. Such visionariness often contributes to dream or (in most of Poe's creative works) nightmare effects.

Poe's theoretical pronouncements on poetry make this visionary intent explicit. For him, poetry was "the rhythmical creation of beauty," a definition that balances theme and form. He also thought that poetry should elevate or excite the soul, which, in his estimation, much American poetry did not do, tending instead toward the "heresy of the didactic" (that is, it was too preachy and moralizing). If poetry is beauty expressed as "music," then the pronounced rhythms and rhymes in Poe's poems exist to excite emotional responses in readers. In keeping with the time-honored concept of the poet as a wonderfully free (and, as a creature of nature, amoral) songbird, Poe's poems are calculated to "sing" readers into the world of the poem at hand. In other words, poetry should enchant (the word means "sing into") a reader into the world or the magic interior of a poem by means of hypnotic outreach. Poe expected his poems and tales to appeal to readers' ears as well as their eyes. To Poe the idea of music involved inherent brevity, and his championing of brief poems is wholly consistent with such thinking.

Jane Austen's likening her literary practices to polishing a tiny bit of ivory for refinement might be related to Poe's composing verse in small quantity. Within such limits Poe created some remarkable poems. For poetic art in which sound and sense coalesce, we may turn to the earliest poem included here, "The Lake—To—," the concluding piece in Poe's first book of verse, *Tamerlane and Other Poems* (1827). The poem's eerie setting deftly stimulates the protagonist's feelings of isolation, loneliness, love, and a death wish. The opening unfolds ordinary youthful tendencies: first desiring solitude, then the lake, then attaching emotional significance to the terrain, which becomes increasingly grim and terrifying.

The situation in Poe's poem resembles Henry Thoreau's experience at Walden Pond; Thoreau's imagination was stirred by the presence of water—the ultimate origin of all life—to celebrate an uplifting excitement. Thoreau's favorite images, the rising sun and moving water, are inverted in Poe's landscape, which might be thought of as similar to what Thoreau himself (jocularly) called Walden Pond—a "walled-in" pond. Poe's eerie lake casts a literal and figurative "pall" (the cloth covering a coffin and within this poem an obstacle to psychological ease) over the protagonist. The "The Lake—To—" stands as the most symbolic of Poe's earliest poems. Confinement in the natural scene promotes fears in the speaker, who fixates on the lake and its "poisonous wave," closed in with unyielding rock and overshadowing pines redolent of death. The "you" addressed remains vague. Is there a literal dead love, or is the one addressed "dead" to the protagonist solely from unalterable separation? Or does the "other" exist as part of the speaker's own psyche, and is "you" some repressed but signal emotion that, locked in as it may be, can not be quelled but continues to torment?

We might take as a paradigm for considering Poe's verse (and, for that matter, much of his fiction) the title of a poem by twentieth-century poet Wallace Stevens, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at

Blackbird.” Poe’s creative works—and not only that about his own blackbird, “The Raven”—yield multiple, equally valid interpretations. “The Lake—To—” constitutes sophisticated literary art, particularly from one as young as Poe. Some other selections in the *Tamerlane* volume are not as artistic, and it may be worth noting that Poe, likely deeming it inferior poetry, never again included a volume form the *Tamerlane* poem “The Happiest Day, the Happiest Hour.”

Many misunderstandings concerning Poe’s poems need correcting. Among them is the notion that “The Sleeper” (titled “Irene” when it originally appeared in the 1831 *Poems*) is grotesque, and that it may betray a necrophiliac strain in Poe himself. The poem has continued as a popular standard selection in anthologies, and it is neither insignificant nor revolting. Rather than betraying any personal emotions or proclivities of its author, “The Sleeper” treats a situation more commonplace in Poe’s era than in our own and is accompanied by the subtle unfolding of a bereaved lover’s psychology. The opening centers on a mourner’s extreme confusion. His being outdoors on a June midnight, his thoughts wandering from the moon down to a grave and water lilies, succeeded by his hallucinatory state becoming less troubled about the “sleeping” lady—this is psychological realism subtly rendered. As mourners typically with solemn dignity, and often by an indirect route, approach a corpse prepared for burial, so this survivor leads us to realize gradually that the lady’s sleep is one of death, and that from the bed, where she has been laid out for burial (ordinary practice in Poe’s time), she will be borne to her grave.

Funeral services in the deceased’s own home are today no longer customary, but well into the twentieth century home funerals were still common: Witness Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), Robert Frost’s poem “Home Burial” (1914), and William Faulkner’s novel *As I Lay Dying* (1930). Poe’s poem suggests the solemnity and stately ceremonies customary in funeral proceedings. The couplets (two-line rhyming units) that constitute the major verse form in the poem convey restraint and order; they are checks on impulses that might otherwise grow frenzied. The occasional triplets (three-line rhyming units) signal rises in the speaker’s emotions, albeit he never lets his imagination riot as it did when the poem began. Overall, the tone and rhythm are of restraint and slow motion, in a movement little by little toward the lady herself; only then do we discover that she is dead. Perhaps the bereaved lover requires such gradual approach to accommodate the finality of his beloved’s death, and so the indirection or obliqueness in his thinking is actually psychologically accurate.

If he had been “moon-mad,” or lunatic, when the poem began (and he could have been subject to nonrational forces that typically hold sway on Midsummer Eve, to which the June time frame may point), just so the lines about the lady’s lying near an open window incorporate folklore fears about the night air’s bad effects upon sleepers. Kept even more distanced, as if when it is faced directly, conveys starkness and bleakness that are too appalling, is the tomb itself, introduced appropriately in the final stanza as if to signify that it is the ultimate resting place for the “sleeper.” Although some are revolted by the line “Soft may the worms about her creep!” we should keep in mind that, consistent with the mourner’s previous ideas, once he contemplates the future, he adjures the worms to move about outside, not into, the lady’s body, so her rest will remain undisturbed. The exclamatory punctuation in this line attests that although the bereaved lover may have strong feelings, the worms themselves should remain quiet, thereby imputing to “soft” its sound, not its tactile context.

Given that “The Sleeper” mirrors the shorter life expectancies of nearly two centuries ago, the poem not surprisingly won early acclaim, not for any melodramatic or novel substance but for poetic form and tone that may be likened to a dignified eulogy delivered at a funeral or even published in

newspaper account of visitation and funeral practices. Poe achieved far sturdier realism in this poem than has generally been admitted, and contrary to what some readers infer, he did not plan to cause revulsion in his public. "The Sleeper" may anticipate the aura of mourning in later poems like "The Raven" and "Ulalume," or in the fiction we find in "Shadow—A Parable." Many readers only reluctantly accept that Poe may not have imagined these pieces as cheap thrills and lurid horrors.

In light of his aesthetic writings on poetry, it is reasonable that Poe should write some poems that partly address poetics, as he does in "Sonnet—To Science," "Israfel," and "To Helen" (1831). Many anthologists view "Sonnet—To Science" as if it were Poe's personal outcry against scientific rationalism. More likely is that Poe felt that a firmly realistic foundation is essential in genuine poetry. To bolster this premise, Poe depicts a speaker, a mere poetaster, who marshals as his inspirations tropes that were hackneyed well before Poe's time, and that patently add decided irony to the speaker's presumable inveighing against triteness. Poe's "poet" not only uses clichés but confines them within a sonnet. Though the sonnet has occasioned interesting modifications in structure and allows for liberties in content, it may also rank among the more restrictive forms in English verse. In form and theme, therefore, Poe's would-be-poet argues a sad case. More to the point is Poe's emphasis on a realistic, plausible foundation for poetry, one that counters the speaker's frail defense of outmoded substance.

The poem "Israfel" also argues for a poetry grounded in realism. The speaker-singer indicates that whereas the angel-poet Israfel's dwelling in heavenly realms may help produce idealism in lyric form, the earthly poet, living in the real world as he does, must cope with less pleasant realities. "Israfel" is, however, inescapably a "singing" poem and thus melds the beautiful with the useful, implicitly hinting at the magic or "enchantment" that often eludes earthbound poets. Like Tennyson, Poe produced poems that were artistic but that did not ignore the utilitarian.

"To Helen" (1831) likewise focuses on an ideal inspiration (her beauty is more ideal than physical in context; Helen of Troy was reputedly the most beautiful woman in the world) that calms a speaker shaken by war and sea travel. The name "Helen" derives from Greek roots meaning lightning, and the very invoking of her name dazzles the speaker with radiant beauty, so that Helen's actual physique is obscured, but the ideal of her beauty is a restorative that brings about a settled state for the speaker. When in the final stanza the speaker has reached his home and Helen becomes Psyche (a legendary female with a lamp), the leitmotif is maintained. Nurturing Psyche's "light" symbolically inspires the speaker, who then assumes the role of poet (a word that derives from the Greek for "creator") with the poem as he "creates" images and rhythm. More to the point, this poet offers us an exquisite joining of theme (beauty as harmonizer) with form (exquisite lyric tone and movement). "To Helen" numbers among Poe's few nonhorrific poems, although the speaker's awe resembles that in many other, less pleasantly situated Poe characters.

Other poems—for example, "The Valley of Unrest," "The City in the Sea," and "The Coliseum"—depict weird dreamscapes that elicit wonder, as they evoke vanished glories and leave tantalizing mysteries for those who respond to their effects. The first poem pictorializes a takeover of a once populated and appealing locale by desolation as foreboding restlessness arises in all natural phenomena there. "The City in the Sea" partly derives from the biblical account of the destruction of the sinful cities Sodom and Gomorrah and partly from the legend of Atlantis, the fabled sunken city that periodically resurfaces and sinks again into the ocean. "The Coliseum" closes on a more positive note than the others because the stones that once teemed with the activities of sports and spectators retain an ability to captivate a contemporary beholder. Mood is everything in these poems, and Poe

melodic sound effects suggest the meandering visionary experiences of the onlookers, who call their visions via song (enchantment) for readers. A similar principle informs “Dream-Land,” with its speaker who has gone imaginatively free-floating and who returns recalling lasting effects of the surreal world, “Out of SPACE—out of TIME.” where his emotions have transported him. While “Dream-Land” leaves the protagonist shaken by what he saw and heard, “Sonnet—Silence” is a tour de force of contrasting sound effects with a theme of the terrifying soundlessness of the “shadowy silence, evil double of the “corporate Silence” (a silence that results from geographic desolation). The fateful silence is that which desiccates the will.

Kindred silence descends upon the speaker and his antagonist at the end of “The Raven,” Poe’s most famous poem. Silence becomes even more terrifying here because the inexorably repeated “still” in the closing lines means absolute cessation of speaking, hearing, motion—physical representations of the will’s powerlessness. The setting resembles those in other works in its gradual constriction of the protagonist. The raven may not actually be terrifying, but he certainly paralyzes the narrator emotionally and physically. Folklore often has ravens in league with the devil; Poe’s raven may, however, be no more than a very ordinary creature seeking shelter and warmth on a cold winter night. That this bird has been taught to articulate the single word “nevermore” may be unusual but not necessarily supernatural. The bird’s speech is turned ghastly by the overwrought narrator, whose “Lenore” may in fact be as imaginary as the raven’s diabolic power.

Ambiguities abound in “The Raven.”³ That a bird admitted to the indoors on a cold December night would immediately seek the highest spot for his safety may be wholly plausible; that that perch is the head of a white marble bust of Pallas (Athena), goddess of wisdom and intellectuality, is also plausible. The protagonist may have been poring over books of magic spells as he nodded (and the incantatory sounds in the poem strengthen this possibility); somehow, his interaction with these books may have conjured the bird, consequently unleashing forces that bode ill for the conjurer. After all, the hour is midnight during the season of the death of the year, and the narrator does mention a “ghost” emanating from his hearth, all of which might hint at supernaturalism. Learning that “ghost” was nineteenth-century slang for the shadow formed by dying embers, however, we may suspect that Poe’s narrator is not really beset by otherworldly torments, but that his mind is gradually disintegrating. Is Lenore an actual dead woman or a significant emotional part in the protagonist’s self that he has managed to “kill” or repress? She never appears as a physical being. She is “nameless,” and yet the narrator keeps invoking her; her name derives from the same root as “Helen,” and we have already seen that that name conveys brilliant light and great beauty. Could this “rare and radiant” Lenore be an ideal, without which the narrator goes mad? His “chamber” may symbolize the interior of a mind, and a closing mind at that. The protagonist doesn’t venture outside his opened door, and seeing “darkness” beyond may momentarily placate him, but creating such an entryway, along with opening the window, could in magical lore suffice to admit the bird and the nonrationality it represents. Once this power is implicitly invited inside, there’s no telling how it may operate. Using the means of Gothic themes (anxiety, fear, loss) and setting (a haunted chamber), “The Raven” gives us the interior of a human head/mind as its “world.”

A companion piece in suspense and terror, “Ulalume” moves us through foreboding outdoor scenery as the nameless speaker and his companion, Psyche, journey during what may be Halloween night. Psyche, the nurturer and illuminator (of the soul more so than the body), attempts to dissuade the speaker from proceeding, though he feels compelled to do so. Although they are outdoors, where they can easily observe planetary signs in the skies, there is an unmistakable sense of constriction and

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